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A True Police Adventure

By Cecil Clark

V LEAPED TO DEATH

You are looking down Yates Street, from Government, and the time is the early 1860's. On the left hand corner is the old Adelphi Saloon. That was where Boone Helm made his first mistake in Canada where the law was too tough for him.

Able lieutenant Jack Gallagher held down Virginia City. Under his direction were George Ives, Steve Marshland, John Wagner, Alec Carter and "Whisky Bill" Graves. Marshalling their forces at the polls they had managed to elect Plummer as "sheriff," and succeeded in getting another Innocent, Ned Wray, made deputy sheriff of Bannack. George Brown was corresponding secretary, and Bill Bunton was vice-president. All had signed a blood oath against betrayal and on the street they recognized each other by the knot in the handkerchief around the throat. Boone Helm was soon a paid up member of the bloodstained brotherhood.

By '64 the Innocents had their men spotted everywhere, especially in Wells Fargo, mine and overland stage offices, where they could give word of gold shipments. Some were in gambling houses as dealers, tipping off the gang to the heavy winners. Penalties for the errant were severe. Sam Barton drank and had a wagging tongue and was banished, later provoked into a gunfight; the man who shot him was an Innocent, told off to get rid of Sam. The only place the Innocents couldn't put a man was in the Masonic order.

Stage coaches were marked on departure with ingenious secret signs giving the value of the gold shipment they carried, and sometimes a member of the brotherhood went along as passenger to help in the holdup when it occurred.

By all the records available it's figured that while the Innocents operated they accounted for the death of 102 men. Two apiece for every member!

THE ROBBERIES and killings reached such a peak by 1864 that the miners secretly formed a vigilante committee and one day when Henry Plummer overstepped himself, they went into action. Charged as sheriff with the custody of $14,000 in gold dust, Plummer put it on a stage, then slipped out of town to meet with three confederates. Mounted, masked and each wrapped in a blanket to avoid identification, they held up the stage, buried the gold, and then riding down a coulee were spotted by a 15-year-old boy, Wilbur Saunders. He took word to his aunt, for he recognized the sheriff by the red lining of his mackinaw coat.

The vigilantes grabbed the four men and hanged them, Plummer wailing his innocence to the last.

In a widespread series of lightning moves throughout southeastern Nevada the vigilantes caught up with the Innocents in twos and threes, and hanged them. Came then a cleanup of Alder Gulch and the last five of the Innocents.

One morning the population of Virginia City awakened to a curious spectacle: 500 armed men were ringed around the town and no one could leave. Then in silent couples the grim-faced vigilantes sought out their men and at gun point herded them to a barn.

So far, of the 50 Innocents, 10 or so had fled the state at the first lynchings, and the vigilantes had hanged 23.

The five men in the barn were the sole survivors.

As the sun climbed higher in the sky that morning something more than gold held the attention of Virginia City's population: something of a social nature was causing the miners to drift to the centre of town. Above, the sky was cloud free, in the air just a hint of the Sierra's tang.

Opposite the Virginian hotel in the heart of town the street was jammed, the wooden balcony of the hotel crowded to danger point. Every roof top, every window had its quota of spectators. There must have been close to 6,000 people, and most eyes were directed at an uncompleted log building on the main street. The owner hadn't yet put the roof on, and a single wooden cross beam connected the tops of the gable ends.

Suddenly the crowd stirred and the clamor of the throng hushed to a more ominous quiet.

"Here they come!" shouted an onlooker, the word ruffling down the street like wind over a wheatfield.

Then a lane opened in the crowd and through it came a procession of 15 men, heading for the half-built store. They were in groups of three, a man in front and two behind him.

When they reached the roofless building, the prisoners noticed five noosed ropes hanging from the cross beam; underneath each rope a three foot high wooden box. Xavier Biedler (whose brother had been shot by one of the Innocents) stepped forward and adjusted the rope around each man's neck.

"You felt for them, didn't you?" someone remarked to him later.

"I sure did," he said. "I felt for their ears; the left one!"

There was neck craning in the crowd, and some friendly banter. Certainly no outward show of anger or pity. To the onlookers it seemed the men standing on the boxes were viewed as poker players who had run into bad luck.

Jack Gallagher was on an end box and spying a friend on a nearby rooftop yelled, "I'll be below in a minute, Joe." Then cheerily added, "I'll open the door for you when you get there."

PERHAPS WE SHOULD run our eye down this row of men and see who they are. Jack Gallagher, Plummer's lieutenant, was over six foot, broad-shouldered, and with something of the air of a dandy wearing an army officer's cavalry greatcoat with a fur collar. A Texan, his luck at the poker table was phenomenal, and anyone who won from him was usually found dead and penniless the next day.

Next to him was George "Clubfoot" Lane, horse thief and stage robber, identified when he held up the Carson City stage once too often.

Next to him was Frank Parrish, dressed like any other miner in a dirty flannel shirt, moleskin pants and high leather boots. Three murders had been laid at his door.

Then there was Hayes Lyons, burly and scar-faced. He had nearly escaped this momentous morning of his life by climbing down the canyon walls near town, hand over hand with finger-tip grip. Found hiding in a shack five miles away, he admitted to two killings.

Last of the quintette is our old friend from the Adelphi Saloon at the corner of Government and Yates, Boone Helm. The raw-boned Kentucky outlaw, his eyes deep set and smouldering, said nothing, just glared at the sea of faces.

To onlookers he appeared more animal than man; and he had the worst reputation of the gang. Not only had he killed men . . . he ate one!

Now, the preparations complete, the crowd was getting restive. There were cat calls and yells of impatience.

"Come on, jump them off!

"Swing 'em!"

Came an interruption; Gallagher wanted a whisky. It was brought to him. He complained the rope was too tight, couldn't get his head back. The rope was loosened.

Back of the doomed men stood a row of five miners, each holding a cord. Each cord was tied to a box.

At a nod from the chairman of the vigilantes the cord on the first box was yanked, and Gallagher pitched forward, to bounce and squirm at the end of the rope, his feet just clear of the ground.

Club Foot George anticipated his end by jumping off his box. One by one the last of the Innocents were meeting death.

Finally, as Boone Helm saw his neighbor pitch to his doom, the Kentucky outlaw yelled, "Every man for his principles! Hurrah for Jeff Davis! Let her rip!" and launched himself into Eternity.

Today Virginia City has been preserved as an original link with the lawless past, a place where each summer tourists meander and conjure up memories. Nearby on Boot Hill are five tombstones. The middle one bears the name, "Boone Helm."

If, as I said in the beginning, there are ghosts to be seen in Bastion Square, certainly one of them is his! The most lawless character who ever walked the streets of Victoria!